DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 224 444 HE 015 778

AUTHOR Meeker, Robert B.
TITLE University Presses: Problems and Prospects.
PUB DATE 2 Dec 82
NOTE 19p.
PUB TYPE Historical Materials (060) -- Viewpoints (120)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Educational History; *Financial Problems; *Higher Education; *Publications; *Publishing Industry; *Scholarship; *Universities
IDENTIFIERS ERIC; *University Presses

ABSTRACT

Historical information on university presses and their problems are considered. University presses in the United States have their roots in 15th century England when the Oxford University Press was established in 1478. The first U.S. press to use the term "university press" was Cornell University; the press operated from 1869 until it was closed in 1884 due to lack of funds. Johns Hopkins University Press, established in 1878, is the oldest university press in continuous operation. Today 77 members of the Association of American University Presses face financial problems related to their desire to expand scholarly communication while faced with a small readership. University press books rarely make money; university presses stay in business essentially because of subsidies. Additional problems include a falling market due to the downturn in higher education that began in the early 1970s, an apparent movement away from purchasing scholarly monographs by university libraries, and recent unfavorable government legislation. Possible solutions to these problems include: the rise of paperbacks, dual publication, increasing foreign sales, gaining additional foundation support, and on-demand publishing. Recording or on-demand publishing is a plan for producing books only when needed; the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) system works in this way. It can be accessed by computer and allows users to examine documents on microfiche. (SW)

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UNIVERSITY PRESSES:

PROBLEMS AND PROSPECTS

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Robert B. Meeker
December 2, 1982

University presses in the United States have their roots in 15th-century England, a single generation after the Gutenberg Bible. Oxford University Press celebrated its 500th anniversity in 1978, having been established in 1478. In the United States, the history is considerably shorter. While it is sometimes difficult to determine exactly when a press begins operation, it is generally accepted that the first press to use the term 'university press' was at Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. The press operated from 1869 until it was closed in 1884 due to lack of funding.

Although Howard University, the University of California, and the University of Pennsylvania all claim university imprints in the early 1870's, the Johns Hopkins University Press, established in 1878, holds the honor of the oldest university press in continuous operation. In the early 1890's there was a flurry of activity with the establishment of the University of Chicago Press in 1891, the University of California Press in 1893 and the Columbia University Press also in 1893. Today there are 77 members of the AAUP (Association of American University Presses).

The growth of the university press movement has many contributing causes. Perhaps the most important is the rapid advancement of higher education in the last quarter of the 19th and first half of the 20th century. About this time, more and more people were becoming involved in reading and education in general. Many colleges and universities at the time were engaged primarily in teaching as opposed to serious research. However, at the turn of the century, there was increased adoptation in the United States of the German university tradition of research and graduate study. In addition to these changes, and as evidence of the spread of education, many professional associations such as the American

Library Association and the American Chemical Society were established during this period. The university press movement can be seen as an outgrowth of these movements.

From the beginning, however, university presses always have seemed to have had difficulty with funding. As previously mentioned, the Cornell University Press failed in 1884 due to lack of funds and more recently, in 1974, the Syracuse University Press was considering closing due to lack of funding. It appears that the main reason for this is that university press publishing is unlike other publishing in that it probably will lose money. The general nature of the type of books published is such that the audience will usually be quite small and selective.

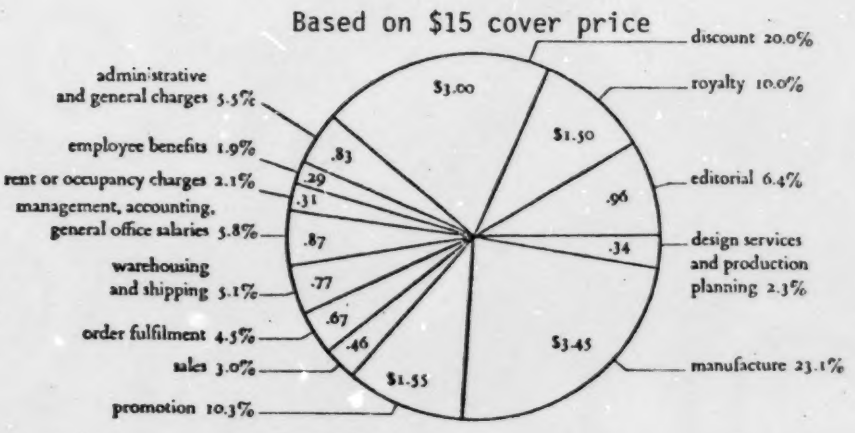
> "We must accept the fact that university presses not only are nonprofit, but also lose money. Even those which lose least are subsidized in one way or another, as they must be if the most important and meritorious scholarship is to be published"[1]

> "It is simply not possible to publish the kind of books that university presses exist to publish without financial assistance. . . Most of the best, most important, most enduring scholarly books never sell enough copies to pay for their publication."[2]

In spite of these financial problems, the university press is established to disseminate knowledge beyond the classroom. Daniel Coit Gilman stated in 1878, "It is one of the noblest duties of a university to advance knowledge, and diffuse it not merely among those who can attend the daily lectures - but far and wide."[3] This paradox, the desire of the press and the university to expand scholarly communication while faced with a small readership, is the crux of the financial problems university presses face.

Problems with the finances of university presses have been in the literature as long as presses have existed. Due to the technical or specialized nature of university press books, press runs are limited. Since few copies of a book are printed, each copy must bear a larger share of the financial burden of the press, so prices subsequently are high. Many book buyers often suggest that many presses overcharge for books and are making a big profit on each book. In fact, nothing could be farther from the truth. Most books issued either lose money or break even. It is a very rare book indeed that actually makes any money. University presses stay in business essentially because of subsidies from either the home institution or from outside funding sources or both.

Harold Bohne[4] examined where the average dollar received from a sale of a university press book went. The diagram below will reveal not only that university presses do not make a 'killing' on their books but also that university presses will need more and more subsidization in the future.



Besides funding problems, the number of students, graduate students, and scholars, the most important market for university press books, has been falling. This is due to a downturn in higher education that occured in the early 70's and is continuing today. Unit sales of university press books have fallen every year for the past ten or twelve years though inflation has kept dollar amounts up. Part of the problem university presses are having is due to the fact that immediately preceeding this period (1948-1968), presses were enjoying what has been called the golden age of university presses. College enrollments were constantly growing. For example, between 1953 and 1965, college enrollments doubled from three to six million students. But in the beginning of the seventies, enrollments began to slow. According to the 1982 Standard Education Almanac, enrollment in 1982 was 12.1 million and for 1985, it is projected to be 11.2 million. This has had and will continue to have a major impact on university presses, because it further reduces the presses' already limited audiences.

Another major problem that university presses face today and have faced for the past decade concerns library purchases of university press books. In many studies, it has been determined that there has been, since 1969, a rather dramatic shift in expenditures from the book budget to the serials budget. In 1976, for example, large university libraries spent 83¢ on books for every dollar spent on serials.[5] This apparent movement away from scholarly monographs has certainly contributed to the decline in unit sales among university presses.

In addition, recent government legislation has not been very favorable to the book publishing industry. The Thor Power Tool Company case became the center of national attention for book publishers in 1979. Thor Power Tool

Company vs Commissioner of Internal Revenue rules that it was

> "not permissible, for tax purposes, to reduce the value of an overstocked title unless you took one of two actions: (1) sell the book at less than cost; (2) scrap the book physically. The first alternative is the procedure known in trade book publishing as remaindering. It just isn't feasible for most professional titles because their appeal is too specialized; price reductions won't tempt the casual browser. That leaves the second alternative: scrapping."[6]

This ruling was originally granted for tool parts but was later extended to include the publishing industry. It has some important ramifications. The Thor decision will decrease the already too short period of time that a book is in print because a backlist will become a liability rather than an asset. Because of this ruling, many publishing houses are remaindering many of their older titles and scrapping those that have no remainder value. Because books will not be 'in print' as long as they were, publishers will have to raise prices on new books.

However, many publishers are coping with this ruling by more carefully analyzing press runs, selling books as remainders sooner, and employing new accounting methods, such as FIFO to LIFO (first in, first out is changed to last in, first out) which will more effectively take inflationary profits into account. While many book publishers are not pleased with the Thor decision, some feel that within a few years, the legislation will have little effect on publishing.

Fortunately, the Thor decision effects only profit making presses and therefore excludes university presses. The sales manager at the University of

Chicago Press even suggested that the Thor decision might, in a back-handed way, help university presses. By forcing commercial presses into more carefully analyzing their potential manuscripts, and causing them to reject those that would require many years of storing before they are profitable, university presses (at least the University of Chicago Press) may see an increase in the number of manuscripts submitted. While just more manuscripts does not mean more or better books, it does give the press a wider range of titles to choose from.

In conclusion, the battle over Thor is still being fought in Congress under the credible support of Senator Daniel Moynihan of New York. As of March 5, 1982, the battle still rages with no quick end in sight.

Although university presses seem to have a considerable number of problems, they also seem to have a wide range of solutions. Among possible 'solutions' include the rise of paperbacks, dual publication, increasing foreign sales, 'clustering,' gaining additional foundation support and on-demand publishing. All of these can be considered as part of the solution to the tight financial conditions experienced by university presses. An individual press may consider as few or as many of these 'solutions' as it sees fit for its particular situation. These 'solutions' will now be discussed in detail.

One of the major movements in the last twenty years in university presses has been the introduction of so called 'quality paperbacks.' Essentially a larger press speciality, Cornell, California, and Chicago issued over forty titles as early as 1968. These paperbacks are generally sold through college bookstores and in many cases are used as 'textbooks' for graduate level courses.

Hawes[7] states that it is not unusual for college bookstores to have 10,000 paperback titles in stock. He states that many bookstores stock two or three copies of all paperback titles of specific university presses because of the interest in browsing by both student and professor. The University of Chicago Press has over 1000 trade paperbacks with over 100 titles added each year. Paperbacks will probably play an increasingly important role in the years to come.

Much has also been written on 'dual publication.' This is simply the simultaneous publication of the hardbound and paper edition of a specific title. Some publishers see this as a way out of declining sales and growing deficits. It has been estimated that one title in seven is currently being published in both hardcover and paper edition simultaneously. Many universities, however, will wait from a year to eighteen months to better assess demand for a paperback edition. This delay in publication also reduce potential competition between the two formats. The Sales Manager at the University of Chicago indicated that 'a few' titles were published in dual format last year with good results and that he plans to try to further this movement in the years to come. This seems to be in line with recommendations from The Report of the National Enquiry which suggested that simultaneous publication achieves three important objectives. First, that the availability of paperbacks makes the book more available and affordable to scholars. Second, that the paperback will be available sooner, avoiding the year to eighteen month delay. Finally it

> "achieves some promotional efficiencies because it eliminates the need for a separate effort to announce the paperback, and reduces the likelihood that those who hear of the cloth edition never learn of the paperback, or hear of it only after the lag of another couple of years."[8]

There are risks, however, to simultaneous publication. The first was stated earlier; the possibility of competition between the two editions with subsequently fewer sales of the more expensive hardcover edition. But many hardcover editions are designed for library, gift, or professional use and as such, would not be affected by the paperback edition. It would seem that more books should be published in the dual format or at least university presses should consider dual publication more carefully. The National Enquiry's recommendation on this matter states that "more scholarly titles should be published simultaneously in cloth and paperback editions as a step toward widening the dissemination of scholarly research."[9]

Another possible avenue of help for university presses would be for them to significantly increase foreign sales. In 1979 Datus C. Smith stated that "the sales of university press books in foreign countries could be doubled by effective promotion, simplification of marketing procedures, and other steps that presses can make themselves."[10] Although university presses obtain about 15% of their sales overseas, this could be area of greater emphasis on the part of the sales department. Foreign sales account for just under 20% of total University of Chicago Press sales.

One of the major complaints received from abroad is the apparent lack of procedural uniformity among university presses. In partial answer to this problem and as a valuable source of sales, the University of Chicago Press belongs to three consortia that deal with foreign sales. In all cases, these consortia involve groups of university presses who band together for mutual sales, warehousing, advertising and many other services. The University of Chicago Press belongs to a consortium in Canada with M.I.T., Harvard, Yale and California, another called UNILIBROS with eight other university presses

that deal with Mexico, Latin and South America, and another in Japan with California, Yale, Harvard and Princeton. The University of Chicago Press also maintains a London Office with Harvard and M.I.T., which includes warehousing and a sales office offering service to Europe and all of Africa. While these are excellent examples of what can be done to promote sales overseas, more university presses need to participate, not just the same five or ten. Smaller university presses need to be encouraged to join these consortium and new stronger promotional material created and distributed.

Even within the United States, there is considerable room for further collaboration or 'clustering' of services among university presses. Simply, this is letting the press or organization that does a service best and least expensively do that job. An example of clustering would be the work that the Johns Hopkins University Press does for other presses at rates much cheaper than could be achieved if each press attempted the services separately. Such services might include order processing, credit management, data processing, warehousing and shipping.

An alternative to this might be for a group of presses to work out a joint plan for services from a centralized location. This can create more efficiency, perhaps faster less expensive service to customers. Many of these collaboratory efforts are currently functioning. For example, Harvard and M.I.T. share warehouse facilities. Another aspect of collaboration/cooperation can be seen in the example of the University Press of New England. This is not a merger of several presses but involved the creation of a totally new press that serves the needs of six universities in a small geographical area.

In their attempt to relieve some of the financial pressure, university presses should find new ways to increase foundation support. The Ford Foundation and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation have been generous in their support to university presses in the past. However, it was felt by the National Enquiry that foundations have not been sufficiently informed on the interrelationships between funding research and funding the ultimate dissemination of the research to scholars worldwide. Research without communication is valueless. What is suggested is continual support for research with the possibility, after careful review, of additional support for the publication of the final report. Foundations must be made to realize the research is only valuable when it is publicly made known.

Perhaps the most revolutionary idea proposed to help university presses in their battle with the 'bottom line' is the idea of 'multiple-track publishing,' or on-demand publishing. August Fruge[11] developed the distinction between 'publishing' and 'recording.' Publishing would remain as it is but with more "rigorous selection and more vigorous marketing."[12] Recording would be based on the idea developed at University Microfilms for the 'publication' of their dissertations. Recording or on-demand publishing is a plan for producing books only when needed or on demand. The material used for on-demand publishing could be simply typewritten or even manuscript with little or no editing. There would be an abstract of the material supplied by the author including descriptors added by a professional editor. This document could then be searched by, ideally, an online bibliographic data base search, similar to what we have today through commercial vendors such as Lockheed's Dialog or BRS (Bibliographic Retrieval System). After locating the document, it can be ordered from a central

depository or perhaps the author's home institution. Datus C. Smith suggests that although this is an excellent idea, it is not suitable for all books and states that

> "If the (on-demand) scheme makes the contribution I anticipate, it will facilitate the customary sort of scholarly publishing by saving the fortune that is now wasted on expensive methods of manufacture, storage, and attempted distribution for books of specialized interest and automatically small sale-books that not only do not require conventional methods but in many cases actually suffer from them because of cost factors. It is absolutely mad to continue the practice of using up a couple of tons of society's limited paper resources and some thousands of dollars of society's wealth to produce whole editions of conventional books that will serve only a small number of readers. And it is just as mad to deny any hearing at all to important scholarly works merely because their users would not be counted in thousands."[13]

In addition to books published this way, other material, such as government reports, proceedings, and the like, could all be treated in this same way. In the field of education, such a system exists. It is called ERIC (Educational Resources Information Clearinghouse) and it functions as a repository of all kinds of 'fugitive' educational materials. It can be accessed by computer and refers the user to a set of microfiche. This type of system could be expanded or altered to fit the needs of the scholarly 'publisher.'

The benefits to the university press of an on-demand system are many. The presses would now be relieved of publishing the well written scholarly book that has very little market potential. With this system of access, the scholarly community would still have 'access' to the document without the wasteful and expensive publishing by a university press. There are, however, a few problems with this system. For example, will tenure committees look down on publications that are not published in the traditional way? Will the

author find his ego deflated when a university press suggests on-demand publishing? These problems should be successfully solved as this appears to be a very valuable solution to some of the pressing economic problems of university presses.

When asked about the future of university presses, the sales manager of the University of Chicago Press predicted slow but steady growth. Apparently the very gloomy forecast of the early 70's was not completely accurate. University presses have learned to adapt to their environment better than most figured they could. They appear to have weathered the major storm of the 70's (the decline in higher education) in reasonably good shape. Few presses, however, have been isolated from the many technological, social, and educational changes that have occured in the past twenty years. The press that stands by itself, unchanging from year to year, relying on 'time-proven' methods may be in for trouble in the years ahead. This is a very dynamic field and it would appear that the successful university press must also be dynamic.

In the future, the university press will have many options - some of which I have discussed. Will university presses begin to publish books of broader general appeal and greater potential sales as well as 'scholarly books?' Will presses continue the present trend of issuing both cloth and paper editions of a title simultaneously? What about on-demand publishing? Will it, by itself, be a major aid to university presses by taking titles with very little sales potential out of university press hands? Is it possible for university presses to further reduce overhead and production costs? Will the further introduction of the computer into the press reduce these and other costs? What

about electronic publishing? Will authors of the future submit their manuscripts on diskettes rather than paper?

These are just a few of the options and possibilities that the university press of the future offers and the university press of today must be prepared for. It would seem that many presses are doing a very good job in preparing for the future. The existence of consortium among presses is an extremely valuable idea and is one that should be encouraged. On-demand publishing, thought not really publishing at all, may prove to be a great ally to the university press.

> "New communications technology, new techniques for information storage and retrieval, new modes of publishing such as on-demand, will relieve university presses of the burden of publishing- in conventional editions- some of the highly and narrowly specialized materials they have purveyed for most of their history."[14]

In conclusion, university presses can not be 'lumped together' as a single entity. Each press has its own personality, its own distinctive history, and its own problems. Each press will have to carefully examine its own particular situation and adopt those changes or technologies that it determines will help itself. As this paper has suggested there is not just one solution, but many.

ENDNOTES

1. Edward E. Booher, "Strategies for the Not-So-Happy Eighties," Scholarly Publishing 11 (January 1980): 103.

2. J.G. Goellner, "The Future of University Presses," Library Journal (September 15, 1978): 1699.

3. Gene R. Hawes, To Advance Knowledge : A Handbook on American University Press Publishing (New York: American University Press Service, Inc., 1967). p. 1

4. Harald Bohne, "Why are Book Prices So High?" Scholarly Publishing 7 (Jan. 1976): 143.

5. Scholarly Communication : The Report of the National Enquiry (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979), p. 137.

6. Daniel N. Fischel, "Thor's Sledgehammer Blow Against Books... The Case for Repealing a Tax Case," Publisher's Weekly 218 (August 1, 1980): 17.

7. Gene R. Hawes, To Advance Knowledge : A Handbook on American University Press Publishing (New York: American University Press Service, Inc., 1967), p. 98.

8. Scholarly Communication., p. 117.

9. Scholarly Communication., p. 120.

10. Scholarly Communication., p. 120.

11. Scholarly Communication., p. 103.

12. Scholarly Communication., p. 103.

13. Datus C. Smith, Jr., "A Case for On-Demand Publishing," Scholarly Publishing 7 (January 1976) : 171-2.

14. J.G. Goellner, "The Future of University Presses," Library Journal (September 15, 1978) : 1697.

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